

[TITLE PAGE]

# Taken:

The first adventure in  
The Quest for Truth

Imagined and written by  
Brock Eastman

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**[Dedication]**

To my wife:

When God gave me you, He gave me all I needed to succeed.

You complete the three fold chord that God designed for my life.



## 1.1 Packing

Oliver stood alone beneath the endless night sky, pondering what lay ahead. In a few minutes his family would leave on an expedition—an archeological dig. They'd be neck deep in ruins and ancient artifacts. At least that is what he assumed. His parents' were hiding something. They were being extra secretive and Oliver didn't know why.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The soft beeps emitted from a device on his wrist. For the seventh time in as many minutes, Oliver glanced at the mTalk.

Midnight.

Where are they?

He sighed. It was just like his parents to run behind schedule. He'd have to finish packing by himself. His family was scheduled to launch at 12:30, and there was still a lot to do.

Oliver hurried back into the cargo bay and set to work stacking the many crates of supplies. One by one he set them in place and strapped them down.

Inspecting his work, Oliver wiped the sweat from his brow. He'd just turned seventeen. No longer the scrawny unconfident boy his family once knew, Oliver's biceps bulged beneath the fabric of his sleeves.

I couldn't have completed this task by myself, this time last year. I never realized what a little physical training could do.

He subconsciously rubbed his fingers over the Academy Squadron badge stitched on the sleeve of his shirt. A feeling of belonging and pride came over him.

Something clattered in the hall of the upper deck. Oliver scowled. Mason and Austin, were probably fighting.

At eleven years old, they had the incredible gift for getting into all kinds of mischief. Their sister, Tiffany, was supposed to keep an eye on them, but she'd probably fallen asleep reading.

Am I the only responsible one here?

Oliver's boots clanked against the metal stairs as he climbed to the balcony overlooking the cargo bay. He looked through the raised cargo door. The wind blew a variety of autumn leaves into the open bay.

Oliver shivered, the breeze had given him an eerie feeling. Something felt wrong. His parents should be here by now.

Walking down the corridor, Oliver stopped and looked into the research lab. Sure enough Tiffany was asleep on a couch. Her hand grasped their mom's journal, its screen still glowing. Oliver understood his parents' need to document every minute detail of their digs into the small computer, but he didn't understand his sister's obsession with reading through the myriad of notes—boring descriptions of glass shards, scraps of metal, and soil samples.

Oliver shrugged. His sigh should have woken her, but it didn't. She had one job. Watch the twins.

Oliver felt the warmth in his cheeks, his temper was rising. He'd learned to control it better, but when it came to his siblings, he had to work extra hard at keeping it in check.

Oliver crept toward the twins' cabin. They'd be jumping on their bunks or throwing things at each other. He could nail them for that, make them clean the galley or lavatories.

Instead the boys were fast asleep, Mason on the bottom bunk and Austin on the top, one leg hanging limply over the side. With a disgusted glance at the messy cabin, Oliver pulled the door shut. He was accustomed to the rigorous order kept at the Academy.

Oliver stared at his mTalk. A quarter past midnight! What was keeping his parents?

He stomped back to the cargo bay in frustration. A lot had changed since he'd been gone. His parents were acting different.

Were they mad at him for going to the Academy? He really didn't have a choice. All males had to serve at some point. They should be proud of him. Very few sixteen year olds got offered early admittance.

And when had they started hiding things from him?

They'd picked him up from the Academy in an unmarked, expensive silver ship. While it wasn't unusual for Oliver's family to inhabit a ship during their expeditions, why had they kept *The Phoenix* secret from him? And who had beefed up their budget so they could afford such a ship?

He knew nothing of their destination, which was also unusual. And there was no sign that anyone from Archeos, the society his parents worked for, would be joining them on this trip.

Oliver flexed his muscles and stepped outside. He tapped on his mTalk and called his dad. Mr. Wikk's picture appeared on the screen while the mTalk tried to reach him. The call was ended and the screen went blank.

That's weird. So not only are they late, but they're ignoring me.

He'd just have to fly back to the house and see what was holding them up.

His sky scooter, a small black craft, hovered outside *The Phoenix*, waiting to take Oliver wherever he needed to go. He swung a leg over and with a twist on the throttle, the craft darted forward.

Ten minutes later Oliver approached his home, a collection of seven connected domes.

The quiet ride was suddenly interrupted by shouting.

What in the world? Letting off the throttle, Oliver killed the electric engine. More shouts. Men's shouts. What was happening? He pulled the sky scooter off the main trail and slid out of the seat.

Oliver cautiously crept up the trail toward his house. There was a large black ship hovering over his front yard. Ropes hung out its sides. A transport of some sort.

More shouting. No Orders, someone was ordering the house and grounds to be searched.

He had to act quick. The backyard was empty. He passed unobserved through the garage and stepped to the door leading into the kitchen.

With a slow turn of the handle, Oliver pushed the door open a crack, a gap large enough to see through. His dad and mom were there, but they weren't alone. There was also an unfamiliar man.

The stranger's face was shadowed by a black pilot's cap, but Oliver could see the faint line of a scar on the man's cheek. He wore a black uniform, covered by a long black trench coat. Three silver stripes decorated the upper part of his coat sleeves; directly above them was a patch with a silver skull and the word *Übel*. The three stripes ranked him as captain.

*Übel*? I've never heard of them.

His parents' seemed shocked. They'd been caught off guard; this man's arrival was certainly a surprise to them.

And the men shouting? Something was wrong. This guy wasn't a guest, he was an intruder.

Oliver held back from entering the kitchen. If he acted now, he may be captured. He needed the right moment.

Oliver's dad and mom stood in the kitchen, Mrs. Wikk behind Mr. Wikk, as if being protected by him.

"What brings you here at this late hour, Captain Vidrek?" Elliot Wikk asked, but it was clear he already knew.



Oliver's dad held his hand behind him, and his mom grasped it. Even in the midst of this unexpected visit, their love was evident. They drew strength from each other.

"You know why I'm here. Don't play stupid with me." Captain Vidrek's voice was low and raspy, like a snake's hiss before it strikes.

He approached Oliver's parents and looked around the kitchen. A satisfied smile slipped across his lips. "You weren't expecting us until tomorrow."

Elliot nodded. "We hoped it would be a few days."

"It'd have been easier if you'd accepted our offer," Vidrek said with a scowl. "But I suppose we're passed that now." He rolled his shoulders and exhaled. "Where are the kids?"

Mr. Wikk straightened. Standing protectively in front of Oliver's mom, he remained silent.

Vidrek rolled his eyes. "We know that you picked up Oliver from the Academy, and Tiffany and the twins from Bewaldeter."

Silence.

This guy knew too much, and by the looks of it he was no friend of the family.

Oliver could knock him out and help his parents escape, but he had to find the right moment. A moment of surprise.

Vidrek shouted over his shoulder. "Search the house! There should be four children somewhere around here."

Oliver scowled, he was not a child.

Footsteps echoed down the hall as the house was searched.

This was his chance. Oliver grasped the door handle. He was ready.

But then he stopped.

Oliver's grip eased. He was outnumbered, he would likely be captured if he attempted a rescue. He'd learned about balance of forces at the Academy.

Taking a deep calming breath, Oliver waited and watched. His heart drummed rapidly.

Mr. Wikk shifted backward. He was purposely blocking something from Vidrek's view.

Of course, the book. Oliver's parents had shown the book to him when he returned. It was the one thing they had shared with him. Covered in crimson leather, the book was the prize find of their last dig. Mr. Wikk hadn't let it leave his side.

Now it sat exposed on the kitchen table like a beacon calling to be seen.

Vidrek moved into the kitchen toward the garage. His movements like a fox on the hunt.

Oliver's dad looked toward the door. Oliver saw the fear in his dad's face as their eyes made contact.

Fear for his son, not for himself.

Mr. Wikk stepped forward abruptly.

Vidrek spun around. "Don't try anything stupid. The compound is surrounded. There is no escape," the captain hissed.

Oliver felt his heart drop to his stomach. Surrounded. What could he possibly do? He had to act soon, or even he would be captured.

Vidrek sighed and leaned against the kitchen counter. "My superiors are quite interested in your work, you know. For some reason they feel you are essential to our destiny." He smiled coyly. "You should have accepted their generous offer and saved me the trip to this scrap of a planet."

Mrs. Wikk's spoke up, "We can't be bribed."

Vidrek's eyebrows narrowed, an eerie darkness crept across his face. "It wasn't a bribe. You should have considered it your salary." He held out a hand and tightened the strap of his glove. "Everyone has a price."

As quickly as the darkness had come, it had disappeared. There was something seriously wrong with this guy.

The captain shrugged. "There is no choice now."

"It doesn't sound like there ever was," Mr. Wikk said.

“True, I suppose, but a willing partner is always better than an unwilling one. Regardless, I’ve been assigned to escort you on this expedition.” Vidrek’s chin rose proudly. “Together we will discover the truth.”

A soldier walked into the kitchen and waited for The captain to acknowledge him.

The man shivered under Vidrek’s annoyed glare. “What is it?”

Clearing his throat, the soldier lowered his head. “Sir, all the bedrooms are empty.”

Captain Vidrek’s fist slammed against the nearest counter. The darkness had reappeared on his face. “Where are the children?”

“They aren’t here,” Mr. Wikk admitted.

The captain looked like a wild animal choosing its prey. His eyes bore into Mrs. Wikk. “Where are they?”

Mrs. Wikk rose to the challenge and responded with confidence and strength. “It’s true. They’re not here.”

Vidrek turned to the soldier. “Search the woods behind the house. The kids aren’t inside. These people never lie, it’s against some code they follow..”

The soldier went into the living room and issued new orders.

Oliver took a deep breath. He had to act now, or the woods would be swarming with bad guys. He looked around the garage for a weapon.

Nothing.

They had taken everything to *The Phoenix*. Oliver heard Vidrek’s serpentine voice again.

“We know that your recent discovery has revealed the whereabouts of Ursprung.”

Oliver’s mom spoke up. “You’re mistaken.”

“As our report stated,” Oliver’s dad clarified, “the discovery at Dabnis Castle leads no farther than the last known location of the Gläubigers.”

Vidrek began to pace. “You speak truthfully, but there is more to the story.”

He turned his back on Oliver’s parents. The captain opened a cabinet carelessly and then slammed it shut, continuing his aimless wandering about the kitchen.

Oliver remained frozen; only an inch of wood separated him and the captain, who was but five steps away. The odor of musky cologne and cigar smoke wafted into his nostrils.

“What do you mean?” asked Mr. Wikk, trying to hold Vidrek’s focus.

“Well,”—he turned back toward Mr. Wikk—“it was previously believed that the Gläubigers had nothing to do with Ursprung. But we know differently now, don’t we?” Captain Vidrek laughed menacingly. “You underestimate my resources.”

Vidrek moved quickly back to the table and grabbed the leather-bound book. He cackled as he lifted it above his head. “This book, this priceless book, is how I know the Gläubigers are linked. The existence of this book was revealed to me just four days ago.”

Oliver’s parents’ mouths dropped. It was clear they’d not expected this. They each quickly recovered their composure. Their family’s safety was all that mattered.

Oliver’s dad inhaled. “Well, now that you have what you need. Kindly leave.”

Vidrek smiled deviously as he wagged his gloved finger. “No, I don’t think so. You see, we still need you!” The finger now pressed against Mr. Wikk’s chest. “As you know, it’s believed that in an earlier time the Federation prohibited research into Ursprung, and with a single key stroke all electronic records that mentioned our origin were deleted.”

So this Übel group wasn’t part of the Federal forces, they were something else. Rogues, mercenaries, thieves, something dark.

Vidrek stepped away from Mr. Wikk and shook the book with his hand. “Discovering ancient artifacts like this book is the only way we can recreate the information that was lost.”

Oliver understood. His parents were renowned archeologists who specialized in the field of Origins. These villains needed their expertise.

Mr. Wikk shook his head. “It could take hundreds if not thousands of years to explore all the abandoned settlements scattered throughout the Federation. You’d need hundreds of teams working for you.”

Vidrek set the book on the counter. “We don’t need to explore every settlement. We”—the captain raised his eyebrows—“already know where the fabled path began. It started at Dabnis Castle. The second waypoint is at the coordinates you discovered in the underground chamber. The very same place you were planning on leaving for tonight.”

Oliver clenched his fists, this man knew more of his parents’ plans than he did. He was angry at his dad, his mom, and this captain.

“As archeology experts you are essential to our mission,” Vidrek continued. “Your expertise will be needed many times during this expedition.”

“We didn’t accept the money, and our decision hasn’t changed,” Mr. Wikk clarified.

Mrs. Wikk nodded her head. “Money has never been a motivation for our work.”

Vidrek sighed. “How noble.”

Mrs. Wikk stared into Vidrek’s cold black eyes. “We search for truth, and its discovery is our reward.”

Vidrek shrugged as if he knew his next words would do nothing to change their minds. “My superiors believe, as do I, that Ursprung holds many answers, answers that validate legends that became myths just a few centuries ago and were historical facts only a millennia before that. You see, my society’s desires are not much different from yours.”

From Oliver’s hiding place behind the garage door, he could see that his parents weren’t buying that last line and neither did he. This guy and his society were after more than just the truth, but what?

Vidrek continued his proclamation: “There is no greater mystery to be solved than where we humans came from—our origin. The rewards garnered from any truths that

you've discovered thus far cannot compare to what Ursprung can unlock." The darkness crept back across Vidrek's face, he looked like a snake ready to strike. The captain's fist rose in anger.

Was the captain going to strike his dad? Oliver gripped the door handle.

The captain shouted, but did not strike Oliver's dad. "And you know that!"

A clever smile crossed Vidrek's face, washing away the anger and darkness. The captain sighed, and Oliver relaxed for the moment. "Perhaps I should share something with you," Vidrek said.

Walking across the kitchen, Vidrek turned to face Oliver's parents. "Many years ago one of my superiors came across an artifact from a long abandoned city. Do you know what was written on that artifact?"

Mr. and Mrs. Wikk shook their heads. Oliver unconsciously shook his.

The captain looked toward the ceiling. " 'And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish.' "

It was if the words were tattooed onto the captain's innermost soul.

"Do you understand those words?" But the captain didn't give them a chance to answer. "The secret to living forever is within our grasp. The secret to eternal youth." Vidrek abruptly turned toward the garage door.

A streak of fear bolted through Oliver. His stomach seemed to turn over, and his mind went numb. Captain Vidrek's cold black eyes were all he could see, and they were locked on him.

## 1.2 Pursuit

Vidrek's gasp seemed to suck the air from the room. Oliver couldn't breathe; the captain's shadowy black eyes were drilling into him.

Spit sprayed from the captain's mouth. "In here! They're in here!"

Oliver's legs were useless. His mind was sending the message to move, but his legs were stuck.

Vidrek lunged for the door. Elliot Wikk intercepted him in midair, colliding with the captain. Their bodies hit the ground with a thud.

Mr. Wikk was the victor. Holding the captain down, Elliot called to Oliver. "Run! Get your sister and brothers out of here. Go!"

Vidrek's face twisted with rage. With his free hand he reached into his jacket and then jabbed a black object into Mr. Wikk's side.

Oliver saw a blue spark and heard a sizzling buzz. Oliver's dad slumped.

No!

The captain shoved Mr. Wikk's limp body aside. Fear swept over Mrs. Wikk's face. Tears began to stream down her cheeks as she knelt next to her husband.

For a split second the world seemed out of focus.

And then Oliver's adrenaline kicked in.

"Dad!" shouted Oliver. Just as he reached to swing the door open and rush upon the captain, Oliver saw his dad's arm move and then his eyes open. He was alive.

Mrs. Wikk looked to the door. "Run, Oliver!"

Oliver's legs came to life. He turned to escape. A shadow lurked in the garage door window.

Blocked. He searched the garage.

A charging cable for the sky scooters dangled from the ceiling. It was his only hope. He grabbed the cable. Hand over hand, Oliver pulled himself up and onto the rafters.

The captain entered the garage and looked up, glaring with rage at Oliver. Vidrek pulled his pistol from the harness and aimed it.

A small red dot appeared on Oliver's chest.

It was over. He couldn't hide. He flinched as he saw the captain's finger press the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Vidrek clicked the trigger several more times. Oliver watched with curiosity as the captain turned the gun over in his hands. The power cell was missing. "Blast! You won't get away, boy. Come down before you hurt yourself."

The garage skylight was still open. Could he get to it in time? He sprang from rafter to rafter and climbed out onto the roof.

Vidrek's voice echoed in the garage. "He's on the roof! Hurry!"

Slick with dew, the domed roof had the qualities of a frozen lake. Oliver fell to his back and slid down. He dug in his heels, but there was nothing to grip. He awkwardly dropped off the roof, arms flailing, his body crashing into the unforgiving ground.

Oliver picked himself up and groaned. He shook out his limbs; nothing felt broken.

Had he escaped?

No. Soldiers appeared out of the darkness and surrounded Oliver like a pack of hungry wolves. Step by step he backed away from the soldiers. Something pricked the back of his neck. A row of thorny brambles created a wall behind him.

Trapped.

Or was he?

Teeth clenched, Oliver twisted and dove into the underbrush. Thorns tore at his exposed forearms and poked through his clothes, pricking his flesh. He rolled to his feet and popped up, ready to run.

An argument erupted among the soldiers.

"You. Go after the boy!"

"I'm a pilot. Send one of your men."



Oliver heard the man grunt. “You two, after him!”

The voices faded as Oliver blazed forward.

He came across a narrow path and recognized it as the twins’ bike trail. Hope trickled into his heart. The path wound among the dark shadows of tall pines; it would lead to *The Phoenix*.

The night air echoed with heavy breathing. Pine needles crunched under heavy feet. The soldiers were nearing. Oliver looked over his shoulder, searching for his pursuers, but the thick forest shrouded the stalkers.

Oliver crouched and listened. The breathing had ceased. The howl of the wind through the pines was the only noise. The soldiers were waiting.

CRACK!

A branch splintered above Oliver’s head. Something had pierced the wood.

“Cruz, set your gun to stun! The captain wants him alive!”

A green streak zipped passed, lighting the underside of the trees with a mystical glow.

At least they weren’t trying to kill me anymore.

But he had to escape. Oliver got to his feet and ran.

Whoomp! The weapon unleashed another glowing green shot.

Oliver dove and then scrambled to his feet again. Each time he heard the telltale whoomp of the weapon, he dodged left or right.

“Stop now, and we won’t hurt you!” snarled Cruz.

“You can run, but you can’t hide,” said the other man.

Needles got snagged in Oliver’s short brown hair as a branch grazed the top of his head.

Just a bit farther.

A fallen tree, a casualty of last year’s wind storm, created a bridge across the chasm that separated him from *The Phoenix*.

Broken branches and house-size boulders littered the trail, but they wouldn't stop him. The obstacle course at the Academy had prepared him. Oliver scrambled amongst the debris and found himself free of its clutches. He could hear the roar of the river coursing the depths of the chasm ahead.

Almost there.

Something rustled in the bushes to his right.

Wham!

Oliver's torso burned as he was tackled to the ground.

He couldn't breathe.

A moment passed before he caught his breath and another before he realized what had knocked him off his feet.

Oliver's arms were pinned to the ground by the soldier who had jumped him. The man stared into Oliver's face with a sinister grin. A drop of sweat fell from the man's brow and landed on Oliver's face; it trickled to his lips. Oliver shuddered at the salty taste.

"I've got you now," the soldier sneered. His hot breath smelled like sewage.

"Hold him, Frank!" The second soldier, Cruz, was gasping for air a few yards away, bent over, hands on his knees.

Self-defense lessons flashed through Oliver's mind. In an instant he knew what to do. He thrust his knee up, catching his captor in the ribs.

A roar of pain erupted from the soldier, and he rolled to his back, holding his chest, breathless.

Oliver clambered to his feet scattering dry pine needles.

Cruz lifted his gun and shot several stuns. Whoomp. Whoomp. Whoomp.

Oliver jumped, rolled, and ran.

With a solitary look backward, he saw the heavier soldier, Cruz, pulling his comrade to his feet.

The log was close now. Just seventy feet . . .

Fifty feet . . .

Thirty feet . . .

Ten feet . . .

The log . . .

Oliver stepped foot over foot. Adrenaline coursed through his body, heightening his senses. Through the soles of his shoes, he could feel every knob and pit in the wood beneath his feet. The log groaned under his weight.

Would it hold?

A sharp wind wrapped around Oliver's body, tugging at his clothes.

Arms out straight he caught his balance.

Almost there.

Whoomp, whoomp. More stuns.

The soldiers hesitated at the log.

Oliver dismounted. Pushing on the wood, Oliver felt the soft bark crumble under his palms. He took a deep breath, and then pushed on the rotting log again.

Stun shots blasted the earth leaving black divots.

A little farther!

Grunting loudly, Oliver gave one final push, and the end of the log swung over the side of the ravine. The dead tree teetered for a moment, and then gravity kicked in, pulling it into the dark crevice. Echoes filled the forest as the timber rebounded off the chasm walls. A faint splash marked the bridge's arrival in the water below.

Oliver smiled. The only other crossing was a mile away. And judging by Cruz's condition, it would take the two soldiers a half hour to make the round trip to *The Phoenix*.

Oliver recklessly charged through the pine forest. Branches tore at his exposed skin.

An ambient blue glow filtered through the branches, creating an eerie iridescent scene. Through gaps in the canopy Oliver saw a bright aqua ball streaming upward. It burst, illuminating the exposed bits of cold night sky.

Flares! The soldiers were signaling their comrades.

Oliver slid down a slope blanketed with brown pine needles. A branch caught him in the face snapping his upper body backward.

His left cheek pulsed with pain. Oliver slid past several more tree trunks before his aching body came to rest at the bottom of the slope.

He'd fallen from a roof, ran through thorns, been tackled by a soldier, and clothes-lined by a branch, and that had all happened in only twenty minutes. What next?

Oliver touched his cheek; he felt the moistness of blood. He'd fix it later. Where was the ship?

In front of him the forest ended, opening into a large clearing. There was the ship, his escape from the villains who were stalking him, their prey.

A warm breeze blew through the cloudless sky and rustled the branches of the encompassing forest. *The Phoenix* sat silently. Its large wings swept forward from the engines to the bridge. The ship's silver skin reflected the brilliant moonlight above, illuminating the clearing with a heavenly ambience. The serenity of the setting didn't match the emotions raging within Oliver.

In moments soldiers would be swarming the area. To launch *The Phoenix*—his family's only escape—Oliver needed time, something he had little of.

Oliver flinched as he saw the twins standing in the ship's small side hatch.

What were they doing?

"Get inside!" he shouted.

"What's with the fireworks," groaned Mason, the older of the twins. He brushed his sandy blond hair from his blue eyes and yawned.

"They're not fireworks!" Oliver broke into a sprint for the ship. The twins stood barefoot in their pajamas, clueless to the danger that lurked in the woods around them.

The younger twin, Austin, stepped out from the hatch, his green eyes half open. “Why are you running?”

“Get in the ship! Where’s Tiffany?” Oliver continued.

“I’m right here.” The soft voice of a girl came from behind the twins. “Why are you shouting?”

“Get in the ship!” he commanded again. It was as if his orders were falling on deaf ears.

The night sky glowed blue. A flare sailed quietly upward and exploded with a loud thunderclap. A shower of blue sparks rained down.

Austin stepped back, bumping into his sister. She grasped his shoulders uncertainly.

Tiffany reached out her hand. “Oliver, your cheek is bleeding.”

He ignored her. He had closed the gap to the ship. Mason fell to the ground as Oliver pulled him in through the hatch. Taking no time to help his younger brother up, he turned and slammed his fist against the button, closing the door.

A yellow light flashed and the airlock lowered, closing with a loud thump. With two clicks it locked.

Oliver winced, the small scratches on his face and arms burned from sweat and dirt. “Austin, Mason, go to the bridge and strap yourselves in.”

“What’s the bridge?” asked Austin as he pulled Mason to his feet.

“It’s where Dad’s flies—” Mason started.

There was no time. Oliver cut him off. “Tiffany I need you to load up the NavCom.”

Tiffany scowled. “Why are we—?”

Oliver didn’t hear the rest of her sentence. Their silhouettes faded as he charged down the dark corridor toward the engine room.

His head was pounding from being hit with the tree branch. His stomach was in knots. He'd only been at the Academy for one year and hadn't flown anything as large as *The Phoenix*. But he had to show courage—for his family.

## 1.3 Getaway

Tiffany sat in the copilot's seat waiting. She tapped the screen of *The Phoenix's* navigation console, known as the NavCom, and it came to life.

The three separate screens glowed. One displayed a three-dimensional globe, representing Tragiws, the planet they were on. Tiffany swiped her fingers across the screen, and the globe expanded.

She centered the screen on a small blue dot, which marked *The Phoenix's* location. A thin green line rotated around the blue icon like the hand on an old clock. With the line's every cycle, Tiffany saw glowing green dots—representing objects—moving closer to *The Phoenix*.

If their parents were on the way, why would Oliver lock them out?

Tiffany counted not two, but twelve dots. Who else was with them—Or coming after them?

Her mind was still fuzzy with sleep. It hadn't been thunder that woke her, but exploding of flares.

Plus, Oliver was out of control. He had come crashing from the woods like a savage, bleeding and crazy.

She looked at the NavCom. The middle screen showed the status of *The Phoenix's* systems. Engines were online. Reactors were powering up. The communications system was activated. All airlocks were sealed.

Oliver was really going to launch *The Phoenix*—without their parents.

Tiffany glanced back at her brothers. They looked nervous sitting in their seats, all strapped in. And why shouldn't they be nervous?

Had Oliver ever flown something as powerful as *The Phoenix*? Even her parents, skilled pilots, had run into a myriad of problems flying even a small craft.

The last screen displayed route and destination information. The destination was a planet called Jahr Des Eises, and her dad had already programmed the variables for the flight.

That provided her some comfort.

The seconds ticked by. The dots moved closer.

Finally Oliver burst into the bridge. “Tiffany, are all the systems loaded?”

“Oliver! Where are—?”

“No questions!” Her brother scrambled into the pilot’s chair and strapped in. “Soldiers are coming!”

“Soldiers!” Tiffany, Mason, and Austin shouted in varying tones of concern.

Oliver ignored them. He tapped one of the pilot’s consoles. With a few more taps a loud thundering buzz filled the air. The overhead lights flickered as the engines drained a lion’s share of power from the reactors.

*The Phoenix* began to shake while the engines fought to produce enough thrust to lift its weight. Oliver gave a hard pull on the flight controls, and the nose of the ship rose slowly. The shaking grew more intense.

Blackness—lights, screens, all were dark.

Oliver brought the nose of *The Phoenix* down. The bridge glowed ominously each time the console screens flashed on and off.

“Oliver, what about mom and dad?” Tiffany cried.

Oliver ignored her.

Tiffany started at a bright blue flash. It lit the cabin, and a loud boom rang throughout the ship. More flares exploded outside.

*The Phoenix* lurched forward as Oliver adjusted the vector of the thrusters. A scraping noise pierced the bridge. The tops of pines were scratching along the sleek silver underside of the ship.

As *The Phoenix* gained altitude and speed, it slid smoothly into the cloudless night sky.



But the peaceful travel lasted only a moment.

Gravity immobilized the kids in their seats as Oliver yanked the flight controls backward. *The Phoenix* pointed straight up. The ship began to vibrate and then shutter, and then shook violently.

“A little longer,” Oliver pushed the throttle forward with all his might. *The Phoenix* needed every ounce of thrust.

“My head’s spinning,” Austin whined from his seat in the second row.

Mason looked at his twin. “It feels like someone’s tightening a rope around my head and chest.”

A siren rang out.

Tiffany looked at the copilot’s radar screen. “Star fighters!”

“How many are there?” Oliver asked.

“Two.”

Oliver turned the controls hard to the right.

*The Phoenix* rolled, then dived.

Tiffany gasped as her body was thrown sideways. She grasped the armrests of her seat. “What are you doing!”

“UTE!” Oliver stared forward. An iron grip on the controls.

“What’s UTE?” asked Mason.

“Urgent, Tactical, Evasion,” Oliver explained. “Hold on! I’m taking us into the canyon!”

“What?” yelled the twins.

A deep narrow chasm littered with outcroppings, the canyon stretched through the woods behind their home. It was the very same crevice Oliver had crossed to lose the soldiers.

“But it’s too narrow for *The Phoenix*,” Mason exclaimed.

Oliver’s shook his head. “Not for me! I flew several canyon missions at the Academy.”

“Weren’t you in a simulator?” asked Austin.

“Where the worst consequence was ‘Failure’ flashing across the screen in red letters?” Mason added.

“Yes, but I only failed twice”

“Third time’s a charm,” Austin mumbled. Mason gave him a frightened nod.

As *The Phoenix* dived, the canyon walls swept up around the silver ship. Oliver yanked the controls left, spinning *The Phoenix* and narrowly missing an outcropping of rock. Tiffany gasped and gripped the armrests on her seat tighter, her nails digging into the leather padding.

Only one of the fighters followed into the canyon. The other remained overhead.

“Why haven’t they fired on us?” asked Austin.

“Because Mom and Dad are—” Suddenly Oliver twisted the controls, spinning the ship to avoid a large protruding rock.

“Oliver! The canyon is narrowing,” Tiffany screeched.

“I know.”

Oliver waited until the last moment and spun *The Phoenix* on its side, squeezing through the narrow gap. The pursuing pilot didn’t have time to react, and the wings of his star fighter were ripped off.

Oliver looked at a screen showing the view behind *The Phoenix*. He saw the pilot eject while the star fighter plummeted into the river. A parachute opened and the pilot floated down to the water. He wouldn’t be chasing them any longer.

“One down!”

Hovering above the canyon, the second fighter waited for *The Phoenix* to come out.

“Oliver, the canyon ends up ahead!” Tiffany screamed. With every second the solid rock face grew larger.

“There’s an opening, and it’s just large enough for *The Phoenix*,” Oliver explained.

Blue eyes wide, Mason gasped. “Are you crazy?”

“Go for it!” cried Austin.

“It’s the only way to lose him,” explained Oliver.

“What?” Tiffany turned on Oliver. “In there?”

As they approached the cave, Oliver slowed *The Phoenix*.

“That pilot’s going to have to decide between three options. Wait at the entrance of the cave, fly to the end, or fly through. I’m hoping he follows.”

Tiffany looked at Oliver. He had a plan, but would they die while carrying it out?

*The Phoenix’s* altitude dropped, almost grazing the water below. The fighter dove in pursuit.

The chase was on!

A giant mouth, teeth bared, was open before them. Tiffany looked at her brother. He was really going for it.

A black void swallowed *The Phoenix* as it entered the cavernous mouth. Tiffany switched on the ship’s lights, illuminating the darkness and revealing hundreds of stalactites and stalagmites.

“Hold on everyone!” Oliver ordered.

“Turn around!” Tiffany shouted.

“We can’t. This is our best chance to lose him.”

The hourglass-shaped formations approached. *The Phoenix* was yards away when Oliver jerked the controls hard right. The ship spun onto its back. The seat harnesses dug into the kids’ shoulders, gravity tugged on the kids trying to smash them against the ceiling.

*The Phoenix* shuttered fiercely and Oliver’s sweaty hands slipped from the controls.

“What happened?” screamed Tiffany.

Oliver cocked an eyebrow. “The left wing rubbed against a rock.”

“Rubbed?” Tiffany accused. “That felt more like a direct hit Oliver!”

She tapped a red icon flashing on the console before her. Several alerts flashed across the screen.

‘Left wing impacted!’

‘Communication transponders offline!’

‘Stability sensors offline!’

‘Wing integrity compromised!’

“Oliver there’s a lot of damage!” Tiffany exclaimed.

“Can’t—worry—now!” Oliver pulled hard on the controls, barely making it around a large bend in the cave.

Her knuckles white, Tiffany gripped the armrests.

The ship shook violently, while Oliver tried to straighten the controls.

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s some variance in the controls.”

“Variance?” called Mason from the second row. “Seems like more than variance.”

Oliver ignored his brother.

Tiffany watched the small fighter come around the corner. “He made it through.”

“That’s all right. I’m going to lose him up here.”

“How?” asked Austin.

“We’re approaching a cavern with several waterfalls.”

“How do you know?” asked Tiffany.

“Dad brought me here once,” Oliver answered.

Flying into the expansive cavern, Oliver pulled back on the controls and *The Phoenix* obeyed, slowing. He pointed to a waterfall pouring from a narrow crevice, high in the cavern wall. “There’s our escape.”

“That gap is too narrow,” called Mason

“We aren’t going in. We just need the waterfall.” Oliver increased *The Phoenix’s* thrust.

Austin leaned forward in his seat. Mason closed his eyes and crossed his arms protectively over his chest.

“Here we go?”

“Where?” asked Tiffany.

“Up,” Oliver answered.

“Up the waterfall?” Mason asked.

A mischievous grin slipped across Oliver’s lips.

“Awesome!” Austin cried, and pulled his harness’ straps tighter.

Tiffany closed her eyes and whispered a prayer.

The nose of *The Phoenix* brushed the falling water. Oliver pulled back the controls and *The Phoenix* angled upward.

Vertigo overtook Tiffany and the twins. Water plastered the windshield, and *The Phoenix*’s speed dropped. Oliver moved *The Phoenix*’s thrusters to full.

The fighter pilot followed him. *The Phoenix* deflected the water into a spray, leaving a clear path for the smaller ship.

Oliver counted down quietly to himself. With a swift pull on the controls. *The Phoenix* flew out of the falling water.

In an instant the full force of the waterfall pummeled onto the star fighter. The small ship’s speed dropped rapidly, forcing it into a powerless downward spin. As it slammed into the pool below, water erupted into the air. The small glass canopy opened, and the pilot climbed out before the craft sank into its watery grave.

Tiffany and the twins broke into cheers and praised Oliver.

*The Phoenix* circled the canyon once, and Oliver couldn’t help but give a wave to the water-soaked pilot below. With a turn of his wrist, Oliver made a u-turn and steered the star-cruiser back toward the cave entrance.

“Why are we going back?” asked Austin.

“If there are reinforcements, they’ll probably try to cut us off on the other side.”

A few minutes later, and with less stress, *The Phoenix* and all aboard had doubled back, and were out of the cave, and into the canyon.

“Let’s get out of here!” Pulling back on the controls, Oliver took the silver star cruiser high up into the sky.

*The Phoenix* began to shake. Gravity was not letting go. Oliver increased the thrust as a remedy, and the ship gained speed. Slowly the dark-blue night sky turned pure black. Millions of tiny lights twinkled ahead. And with a final shudder, *The Phoenix* broke free of Tragiws.

Like a tiger ready to pounce, Tiffany turned to Oliver. “What’s going on? Where are Mom and Dad?”

Frowning, Oliver looked her in the eyes and shook his head. “We aren’t safe yet.”